

# **The Birth of Narrative out of the Spirit of the Excuse: A Speculation**

Fritz Breithaupt

*Indiana University, Germanic Studies*

**Abstract:** This article argues that the origin of narrative lies in the “excuse” and that the structure of the excuse marks what we nowadays consider as narrative. The defining feature of the excuse is that it provides a counter-version to the master story of the accusation and thereby opens a multiplicity of versions. Given an excuse, there is not just a plurality of possible plot developments but also a consideration of linguistic nuances when weighing responsibility. The excuse generates a context within which the acts of the speaker appear in a different light or as elements of a different story; hence, the excuse should be described as a context-generating act. The article considers the features of the excuse, links excuse and narrative, provides an evolutionary consideration of the function of the excuse narrative and indicates how the excuse narrative is a key feature of fiction.

And he said, Who told thee that thou [wast] naked? Hast thou eaten of the tree, whereof I commanded thee that thou shouldest not eat? And the man said, The woman whom thou gavest [to be] with me, she gave me of the tree, and I did eat. And the LORD God said unto the woman, What [is] this [that] thou hast done? And the woman said, The serpent beguiled me, and I did eat.

Genesis 3

My thanks go, first of all, to Suzanne Keen for her many encouragements and to Meir Sternberg for not accepting half-baked excuses in the crafting of this text. Many others have commented on parts of this paper and I would like to express my special gratitude to Claudia Breger, Christopher Chiasson, James Phelan, Benjamin Robinson, and Johannes Turk.

## **1. The Accusation**

Most of us are used to think of narrative as something rather complex and with an enormous range of possibilities. Any attempt to reduce narrative to one basic structure thus seems naive, reductive, or worse. Nevertheless, we all know a narrative when we see one. Maybe, after all, narrative can be defined in simple terms. Hence, the goal of the paper is to propose one possible structure and origin of narrative. I want to present this suggested core structure and its consequences as clearly as possible, even when this means to side-step important narratological debates of the last decades.

The discussion I wish to enter relates considerations from narratology

to evolutionary biology and cultural history. Several important attempts have recently been made in this area to identify the structure of narrative and to offer a functional account of its evolutionary origin. The suggestions for such a structure and purpose of narrative include play and anticipation (Eibl 1995; Boyd 2009), social cohesion and gossip (Dunbar 1996, 2004) and punishment (Flesch 2007).<sup>1</sup> Instead, this article will argue that storytelling offers an immediate advantage to the narrator in situations of accusation: by providing an excuse narrative, the narrator may escape punishment and also enjoy an evolutionary benefit of getting away with risky behavior. The excuse, as a response to the accusation, opens the field of narrative by casting doubt on the correct account of the events and the responsibilities involved.

This is how it begins: someone catches someone else, in *flagrante delicto* or afterward. God accuses Adam of eating the forbidden apple. Instead of simply punishing the alleged offender, the accusing party chooses to resort first to a communicative act, the accusation. The accusation opens the scene. In the following we will consider this accusation in its idealized form. It provides the *master story*, the first and only account of the event within the drama, the only version that seems morally and legally to matter. It states what the accused did, what happened in reality. Even if it is a false accusation, it claims to reflect the event narrated. Still, the accusation does more than merely depict reality. It states that the accused is on the wrong side of the law or morality, while implying that the speaker is on the right side. The accusation thus implies the moral superiority of the accuser, claiming for him the power to counteract wrong-doing. Hence, it is also a master story in the sense of coming from an empowered speaker. (Such a speaker could even make a false accusation or make up the law or norm for the sake of making an accusation, and thus shape the empirical and normative world according to his command.) Generally speaking, the master story is an account of what happened, casting at least one character in the role of the agent alleged to be guilty of a violation of some law, norm, and authority.<sup>2</sup> The one who makes the accusation speaks with the power of being right, even if he happens to be the weaker individual, and thereby operates as authority in the communication.

The minimal structure of accusation thus involves three elements:

- 1) The representation of an event, that is, of the *facts*, involving acts by A that caused certain results (or were intended to): This is what A did.
- 2) A's act *broke a law* or norm or defied an authority.
- 3) The "finger-pointing" of the *address in social context*: I, the righteous one, disclose in public that you, A, did this act and it was wrong.

---

1 For an overview, see Scalise Sugiyama (2005).

2 The difference among the violations does not concern us here.

As this shows, the form of the accusation brings us into a complex field, involving human agency (what qualifies as an act?), normative control (what is one allowed to do?), and public communication (what does it require to make a statement of accusation? What are the institutional frameworks required to expose someone in front of others? Who are the addressees of the accusation?).

However, we have not yet entered the field of narrative, at least not in the sense that I want to suggest in what follows. The accusation is not a narrative, even though it does involve a more or less public report of an act, such as “A did x, and this is not allowed,” which is the “*narratio*” in the rhetorical sense. One of the key reasons why I think that there is not a narrative involved in the accusation is that it does not (mean to) invite competing interpretations. As I will explain below, “narrative” involves some doubt about what happened or how to interpret it. The speech of accusation implies that it provides the *one and only* authoritative account of the events, that it simply depicts the things that happened.<sup>3</sup>

The historical origin of the accusation is not narrative, fiction, or discussion, but more likely the curse, condemnation, and guilty verdict. Every accusation aims not to open a field of inquiry but to close the case. Only with the emergence of the modern court of law does the accusation provide an opening account that will be responded to by an advocate, defender, or the accused, and will eventually lead to some resolution by a judge or jury. One should not forget the relatively short history of the institutionalized defender (the Greeks favored an independent advocate who would speak on behalf of the accused, while the Roman legal system created the hired defender as a substitute for the accused; in medieval times, even the right of the accused to be heard had to be reinstalled).<sup>4</sup> The statement of accusation does not by itself involve this entire drama of the court. The accusation seals itself off from doubt, from interpretation, and the latter is what generates narrative. Nevertheless, it is the accusation that makes it possible for narrative to emerge, as response to accusation.

## 2. The Excuse

Despite the attempts of the accuser to close the case, one possible response to the accusation is the excuse, and it is here that the narrative comes in.

---

3 James Phelan, when I presented these arguments orally, suggested that the accusation, by virtue of being codified in the form of language, already implies that one can interpret it in different ways, and that is a narrative. Whereas I agree in principle with Phelan’s suggestion that the accusation allows for a narrative reading, but I still maintain that the defining feature of the accusation consists in posing a claim that is exclusive and does not tolerate an alternative reading. Phelan and I may disagree about the degree to which forms of speech and speech acts such as the accusation can establish a regime independent from narrative.

4 For the institution of the advocate in Athens and thereafter, see Campe 2008.

What does the excuse do? It aims to deflect the speaker's responsibility, by offering a counter-version of what happened that changes at least one key element of the events at issue. Thereby something entirely new emerges, namely, two accounts of the event, so that the accusation juxtaposes with the excuse. This change does not simply add some uncertainty to the facts. Rather, it transforms the landscape of inquiry from the register of empirical facts to that of the verbal construction of acts and speech acts, where even linguistic nuances can matter. As a result, doubt and linguistic self-referentiality reign. For a narrative to arise, this shift to linguistic codes has to take place. A consequence of this shift is that even more versions can emerge, simply because they are *linguistically* possible and not because they are true. (Of course, many accusations today are made in the awareness that they provide just one of many versions or descriptions of the event. But even so, they try to hide this fact, to speak with authority, and to claim authority. This is why this article speaks of the accusation in its idealized form as a speech that claims to speak the truth itself.)

There are two forms of the excuse. The first adds details to the accusation's master story, reminiscent of the excuse voiced by Adam and Eve: "Yes. I did it, but I was tempted into it by someone else. I was thus not acting of my free will, and basically it was not me acting. Hence it is not my fault." By adding Eve to the story, Adam offers a context for his action that reduces it to a mere reaction. Whereas this reduction is crucial, the fact that someone else gets blamed is secondary. In fact, there does not need to be another intentional agent, as in: "I am late since I got stuck in the elevator," or "I did it, but not on purpose." In all of these cases, the two juxtaposed accounts of the event, the accusation and the excuse, are not mutually exclusive. Persuasion got Adam into trouble and he reacts by aiming to persuade others (God) that he was persuaded and not free when acting. In the biblical version, this rise of language is associated with wisdom, Adam having just eaten from the tree of knowledge. That is, his ability to counter God's accusation, to offer an excuse, is presented as the very mark of human knowledge.

The second form of the excuse provides a different version of the actual events from what the accusing party claims to have happened. Consider: "No. I was not having sex with my boyfriend when you saw us in bed, Mom. We were playing a game imitating animal sounds." Here, the excuser rationalizes what her mother has perceived (sounds, being in bed) and fabricates another explanation than the obvious one that is still logically possible based on the perceived facts. Assuming that this excuse is a lie, the excuser needs at least some basic theory of mind (ToM) regarding her audience (the accuser, the jury) to craft the excuse.

The defining feature of both of these forms is the alternative offered to the accusation, one that denies the action of the defendant, whether on the ground that he or she had no or little agency or that he or she was doing

something different. Thus, Adam's excuse agrees that the act in question (eating the forbidden apple) has taken place but adds further contextual elements that could shift responsibility for the act. On the other hand, the second form of excuse, the it-was-different-version, denies that the act has taken place. This latter form illuminates the creative thinking inherent in both forms of the excuse: the speaker is able to distinguish between the perceived facts and the interpretation implicit in the accusation. In order to change the (dangerous) interpretation of the facts, the excuse presents elements that make an alternative interpretation of what happened possible. This is obvious in the case of the daughter caught in bed, but is also true of Adam's excuse: he aims to oppose the interpretation that the eating of the apple by itself constitutes guilt. Like the daughter caught in bed, Adam adds mitigating circumstances that would enable him to escape from the accusation of wrongdoing. This creative side of the excuse is best called a context-creating act.

It is helpful to consider the relation of the excuse to the justification. To justify the action would mean to agree that the alleged action indeed happened and to claim that it does not break the rule. Or, if it does break the rule, it thereby does greater good. John L. Austin (1990: 178) puts the distinction bluntly as follows: "In the one defence [the justification], briefly, we accept responsibility but deny that it was bad: in the other [the excuse], we admit that it was bad but don't accept full, or even any, responsibility." It therefore seems that Adam's speech is not a justification but an excuse, since he knows and admits that eating the apple was bad.

Still, there is a complication. As clear as the line between excuse and justification seems, Adam could still view his speech as a justification. In his mind, his act could have been not eating the apple but listening to Eve, which he might see as justified. Conversely, a legally accepted justification, such as killing in self-defense, could also be seen as an excuse. The accused party might view his act not as a killing of the other, but rather as an act of self-defense, which happens to kill the other. This would shift the emphasis away from justification (as Austin has it, "I killed him but it was not bad") to excuse ("killing is bad, but I did not kill. What I did was to defend myself which occasioned his death"). It seems that one can indeed subjectively shift between excuse and justifications.

It cannot be a surprise that the border between them is somewhat porous. After all, the maker of an excuse aims to get off the hook of the accusation, and borrowing from the logic of justification would do the trick. Of course, our legal systems are designed to eliminate the grey zone between justification and excuse. And they do so by providing institutionalized definitions of what constitutes an act and which justifications are legally acceptable. However, there was a time when no institutions of law existed that could codify the borders between justification and excuse. In fact, it is this point of indeterminacy to which

many excuse narratives revert.

We can now define the productive aspect of the excuse. It is certainly not easy to decide whether the excuse is a speech act. Searle (1975), following Austin, considers it as an “indirect” speech act. Austin himself is less explicit about the status of the excuse (his work on it predates *How to Do Things with Words* [1962]). According to him, a speech act is an utterance that produces a fact that did not exist before. By uttering something, like a promise, the referent of the utterance comes into being, is produced. In light of this definition, it seems more appropriate to distinguish between the productivity of the speech act and the excuse. Austin’s definition does not fully fit the excuse, which refers to an alternative version of the events that it claims to have truly happened as stated. The productivity or creativity of the excuse, it seems to me, lies in its evocation or creation of an alternative context that sheds a different light on the described events. This is true for both forms of the excuse: Adam adds an instigator (Eve), which makes his action forgivable, and the daughter adds a context (the animal game) that can account otherwise for all perceived facts. This is why I would suggest calling the excuse a context-generating act or, in short, a context act.

### 3. The Excuse as Narrative

We now have some first ideas about the excuse. However, we have not yet argued why the excuse would be more relevant to narrative than related speech acts forms, such as lying, claiming, or question and answer. Here we need a fuller description of what relates the excuse to narrative. As a form of telling an event, the excuse has five general features that place it at the core of narrative:

- 1) Excuses offer an *alternative version* of what happened.<sup>5</sup> The excuse *reacts* to another report of the event, thereby reducing the first to a mere version, as distinct from the truth itself. The excuse thus shifts the register from the sheer representation of facts to different forms of verbalization:<sup>6</sup> even slight changes between them can signify<sup>7</sup> and

---

5 Hayden White (1980: 16) defines the modern historical narrative in this sense, as one that requires a multiplicity of possible versions: “In order to qualify as ‘historical,’ an event must be susceptible to at least two narrations of its occurrence.”

6 In this regard, suspicion would appear similar, because any explanation of it falls under the sign of “maybe.” However, suspicion does not so clearly involve a transition from fact to verbalization.

7 Phelan (1989) likewise stresses the adaptability of narratives, which always allow another version.

doubt arises.<sup>8</sup> This shift to linguistic codes not only generates narrative, but makes possible further versions of what happened.<sup>9</sup> This distinguishes the excuse from other modes of speech relevant to narration, such as confessions.<sup>10</sup>

- 2) The excuse is actively engaged in *establishing or denying causalities*. Adam's excuse moves from the unity of causality and responsibility alleged by the accusation ("you caused x and are therefore responsible") to a weaker version of the link between them ("I did x, but I am not responsible for the outcome, or B did y, which caused me to do x" and the like). The maker of the excuse is still associated with the action, but it is not clear any longer whether his involvement makes him accountable as the cause of the action. In the excuse (of the kind made by Adam), causality does not cease to operate, but it goes together with other causalities that need to be considered and thus becomes dissociated from responsibility. In narratology, it has become customary to speak of "temporality" when two events stand in proximity to each other but are not causally connected. In this sense, we can say that the excuse turns causality into some other linkage that is *closer* to mere temporality, without however leaving causality fully behind. Here, the transition from mere temporality to causality, postulated by E. M. Forster as the defining feature of "plot," is reversed.<sup>11</sup> In general, I follow Sternberg (1990, 1992) in asserting that the complex interrelation, or back and forth, between discourse temporality and action causality is central to narrative. Neither mere temporality nor clear-cut causality (as in scientific experiments) alone constitutes narrative, but rather the suspicion

---

8 Paul de Man (1979: 281) is especially lucid in observing this shift from facts to the linguistic properties of the excuse, though, as I will suggest below, he goes too far in claiming the complete detachment of linguistic constructions of the world from its referents: "No . . . possibility of verification exists for the excuse, which is verbal in its utterance, in its effect and in its authority: its purpose is not to state but to convince, itself an 'inner' process to which only words can bear witness."

9 Put differently: "The key [to narrative] lies in whether the reading subject processes the given object *into* actionality, rather than into any alternative, static design" (Sternberg 2008: 50).

10 With Brooks (2000), one may wonder whether the "confession" provides the key features of narrative in the sense explicated above. Brooks points out that, whereas "confession" has come to operate as a mark of authenticity in our culture, it does not depict things as they were. Rather, the desire for confession is a desire for a public scene of exposure. In this sense, one may consider confession as a core mode of narrative. Still, I would hesitate to view the confession narrative as the key structure of narrative in general (to be sure, Brooks nowhere suggests this). After all, confessions still claim to depict events as they happened. Instead of casting doubt on the event, they aim to end all debate about what happened and to dignify events as (subjective, legal, moral, religious) truth. The case of the excuse is different.

11. About Forster's famous distinction, see Chatman (1978: 45-46) and Herman (2002: 96-105). Both Chatman and Herman discuss the difficulty in truly separating the temporal and causal connections, since even temporal links seem to suggest or imply causality.

that things may have occurred *differently* than their presentation suggests.

- 3) The excuse story aims for *persuasion*. The model of narrative that I propose is not a story told for entertainment, but one that pulls the audience (and, to begin with, the accuser) to its side (see Keen 2008): here, it would have us agree to this new version of the events and to reject the master story of the accusation. The goal is to achieve the assent of the addressee: "Indeed, it was not your fault," and the pacification of the accuser.
- 4) In a related way, the excuse aims to get the audience to see the events through the eyes of the speaker and to *empathize* with him/her. The desired outcome here could be: "Yes, I see that you did not want this result either, and feel bad about it." Generally, narratives require a unique subjective perspective on the events, some focalization that differs from a *Vogelperspektive* [God's-eye view]. A narrative can arise only when a subjective perspective modifies at least some elements of the master story.
- 5) In the excuse, the speaker invokes something beyond the "I" to disclaim *responsibility* in the act. For example, "It was not 'I' who is responsible for the event though, yes, I did certain things that are connected with this outcome. It happened because . . . ." The excuse thus denies the power and control of the speaker, and subordinates him to other causes, like the "she" that Adam evokes. Instead of a first-person narrative, the excuse favors a tone of impersonality, even in its first-person style: "It happened . . . , " *Es geschah*," and the like, in the manner of fairy-tales.<sup>12</sup>

It seems at least worth considering whether it is in this context of the excuse that narrative has given rise to the concept of responsibility. Responsibility may emerge, not so much from the confident feeling of right and wrong, or good-for-me and bad-for-me, but rather in the manipulability of rightness and wrongness. Both sides are committed to allowing listeners/readers to make moral and legal decisions, because both

---

12. <sup>12</sup> Possibly, it is due to the excuse that "the self" emerged as a leading concept of civilized man: it both claims a self as a potential agent *and* the bracketing of its responsibility. (This development is historically connected with the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries: see Wahrman [2004], Taylor [1989]. On this peculiar paradoxical position of the self, see Luhmann [1989] and Breithaupt [2008].) Narrative, likewise, is not the language of the monologue nor of the glorified power of the "I," but the subjective voice of a speaker who shows how he is involved but not too involved in the events. A related, though diametrically opposed structure can be found in Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals* (1887), where the weak underlings invent the language of morals in order to persuade the strong "beasts" that they are bound by morals as well. In Nietzsche, the language of "morals" is invented to limit the boundless power of agency of the leading race. The excuse, however, allegedly uncovers the absence of agency behind the appearance of agency. These issues would, however, lead us beyond the topic of this paper.



sides feel they can win the case. Responsibility could in this sense have literally derived from the ability to respond and not so much from some *mens rea* (guilty mind).

In the present essay, this potential link of narrative, law, and responsibility cannot be explored, but one would doubtless gain many insights from such an investigation. In fact, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the modern notion of *narrative* derives from sixteenth-century Scottish law and designates “an allegation on which a plea was based.” Sternberg (2008: 42) goes so far as to argue that even laws and rules are, essentially, not timeless generalizations but “omnitemporal” narratives. It also should be mentioned that several important works have stressed the importance of judgment at the center of narratology, including Wayne Booth’s *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961), James Phelan’s *Experiencing Fiction: Judgments, Progressions, and the Rhetorical Theory of Narrative* (2007), and William Flesch’s *Comeuppance: Costly Signaling, Altruistic Punishment, and Other Biological Components of Fiction* (2007). Flesch’s account deserves praise for its courage in suggesting that the key purpose of fiction is to monitor the punishment of those who deserve it. Nevertheless, I would like to correct his specific claim that the purpose of fiction is merely negative: that we, as social beings, all make sacrifices for the collective and so have an interest in punishing others who abuse the social structure. In contrast, I want to spell out an interest that links individuals more directly to fiction, namely, the desire to prove one’s innocence and non-responsibility. Every narrative protagonist whose actions are made (culturally, logically, psychologically) excusable stands in for the reader/listener.

### 3. Emotion Transformation

At least since Aristotle’s *Poetics* there have been debates about the connection of narration, cognition, and emotion. In the last decades, many of the contributions to these debates have had an evolutionary bent.<sup>13</sup> My speculations about the excuse point to a simple suggestion: narratives aim to

---

13 It is hard to even begin to outline this debate, since it consists mostly of parallel but not well-connected theoretical enterprises. At its center stand the ideas that (1) emotions are in a cognitive sense quite rational (and thus cannot be well understood by means of the old dichotomy of the emotional (irrational) versus the rational, and (2) that narratives and emotions form some unity that does some (but which?) cognitive work. So much for the agreement. From here, quite a few disconnected ideas have emerged on the cognitive rationality of this bond of emotions and narration (“emotion narration”). Bruner (1986) and Dautenhahn (2001) in particular have worked toward the “Narrative Intelligence Hypothesis,” which views the origin of human intelligence in storytelling. Dunbar (1996, 2004) likewise argues that the origin of human mental power derives from social functions, including gossip and thus storytelling; his famous argument is that gossip replaced (emotionally calming and reassuring) grooming in primates. Eibl (1995) and Boyd (2009) locate the origin and function of art and narration in the cognitive play with patterns, and thus in the anticipation of possible events. If able to anticipate possible events, one is less likely to react emotionally with shock and better equipped to use prepared action plans. Damasio (2005) has developed a model of

transform emotions (see Velleman 2003). The work of the excuse, we said, lies in providing an alternative version to the master story of the accusation. The emotional language of the accusation is anger and its variants. Hence, the excuse works to transform the anger into something else, which is at least not anger directed at the accused. Such a transformation could calm down the accuser. If not, it could limit the anger to the accuser and prevent the jury from being affected by the angry accuser. The transformation might also soften the anger into puzzlement, so that the accuser wonders whether to believe the excuse. One can speculate that the everyday mini-drama of an angry accusation and a responding excuse reenact the situation that has recommended narrative in the first place. Children possibly learn to narrate because they understand the usefulness of it.

Note, moreover, that anger is not just one of the basic emotions (Panksepp 2005) but a special emotion, which shows the limits of the emotional copying function. Most emotions and feelings can easily lead to emotional contagion (Hatfield et al. 1994), whereby panic, sadness, happiness, say, or fatigue and disgust move from one individual to the next. But anger creates a situation in which copying it is not typically the best response for the target of anger (the accused). Hence, facing an angry accusation is a situation that recommends and develops, instead, a mechanism such as the excuse.

#### **4. A Few Possible Complications**

The combination of these five features of the excuse (section 3) suggests a close relation to narrative. However, it is not clear yet whether this relation actually warrants looking for the structure of narrative in the context act of the excuse. At least three possible complications need to be mentioned:

- 1) If the excuse provides the basic structure of narrative, there might be an evolutionary development of such a pattern. What functions do narratives serve, and how do these explain the combination of the five narrative elements?
- 2) Does this claim concerning excuses go so far as to say that the structure of the excuse can still be identified in all narratives? Are all narratives excuses? Can one study narratives by studying excuses, and vice versa?
- 3) In the excuse, the speaker claims limited responsibility for his or her actions. Hence, it is a narrative in the passive mode (though not necessarily in the grammatical sense). Would this not be an obstacle to

---

human emotion and memory (the “symbolic marker theory”) that suggests that past experiences are condensed into feelings that can be reactivated when needed. A bad feeling, for example, condenses a (narrative) experience of one’s past and will guide one not to make decisions that lead to a similar situation.

any narrative theory? After all, many early narratives, such as the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, tell about a hero in action, not about the lack of initiative or intention.

These complications will be addressed in what follows. Question 1 will lead us to a speculation about anthropological aspects of the excuse (section 6), and questions 2 and 3 will force us to rethink the status of fiction (section 7).

## 5. Monkeys, Evolution, and the Bible

Why have narratives developed? What, if any, are the evolutionary gains associated with narration and/or the neuronal ability to process narratives? Even if one does not think that there is something like a narrative brain or specific narrative brain circuits with their neuronal routines, one may reason that the ability to narrate is anchored in brain developments. These are likely rooted in evolutionary achievements that at least partly antedate the cultural revolution of *Homo sapiens* some 40,000 years ago.

A word of caution seems to be in order. Evolutionary tales can be invented for various features and patterns of behavior. Fantasy is always a danger. I trust my readers have noticed the speculative nature of this paper and do not need a special warning to consider the following remarks critically.

There are two main evolutionary theories of narrative on the market right now. The first claims that narrative emerged as part of human play. In a harmless realm of mere words, man learned to use imagination for real-world scenarios, that is, to anticipate events and thus acquire a general competence for handling difficult situations. This theory has long been current and has been adopted by literary critics, such as Eibl (1995) and Boyd (2009). Its rationale is clear, imagination being directly linked with a possible evolutionary advantage. It also fits our understanding that mere instinctual behavior of humans is supposed to be replaced by (playfully) learned actions. The shortcoming of this theory is that it remains rather unclear whether play itself provided selection advantage or whether its emergence was a mere byproduct of other evolutionary gains. Play requires spare time, and it is possible that the true evolutionary advantage was to produce this extra time. Hence, play may be an important aspect of human learning and narrative capacities, but its emergence could be explained otherwise.

A second theory argues that narrative plays a role in the human competence to understand and influence conspecifics (that is, in social intelligence). Over the past decades, social intelligence has often been identified as a decisive factor in the impressive brain growth of man. Among other schools, the social intelligence hypothesis (or Machiavellian intelligence hypothesis) has found strong support in the works of Michael Tomasello

and Robin Dunbar. Dunbar (1996, 2004) argues that human intelligence is a result of a shift in the management of social interaction. Whereas most primates bond via grooming, man has found a different technique: gossiping; that is, exchanging little narratives about others. Grooming has the disadvantage of being quite time-consuming, at least if one assumes that each member of a group has to have a grooming relationship with all other group members. According to Dunbar, gossip accomplishes the same basic goal of social coherence in a group, but does so more time-effectively. If a story about one individual circulates, all group members learn quickly about his situation. Dunbar calculates that a grooming group can have up to fifty members, while a gossip society can include up to one hundred and fifty group members. Increasing the group size, he argues, gave man a significant evolutionary benefit.

Still, there is at least some evidence that these and other evolutionary benefits of narrative are best explained by their link to the excuse. Frans de Waal, an adamant advocate of complex primate cognition, has collected an extensive corpus of observations of chimpanzees and bonobos, which reveal rich social cognition. In our context, it is helpful to consider his frequent reports on deception in chimpanzees. De Waal (1998), like many others, notes a surprising amount of sexual contact between low-ranking males and high-ranking females. When high-ranking males observe such contact, they violently interrupt it and usually punish the male. Both the low-ranking male and the females seem to be quite aware of the illicit contact and aim to cover it up. They leave the group separately to find a hiding place. The females typically suppress the copulation calls that they produce when they are mating with low-ranking males. At one point, de Waal observes how a low-ranking juvenile male observes one of these illicit matings and immediately rushes off to draw the leader's attention to this act. Apparently, even the young male has an understanding that the act is illicit (and may even count on gaining the leader's respect by his report). In an experiment conducted by Hans Kummer (see Dunbar 1996: 92-93), he locked up the dominant male of a baboon group in a cage, visible to all members of the group. A lower-ranking male seized the opportunity and had sexual intercourse with at least one female, both suppressing their usual copulation calls. Kummer referred to this behavior as "acoustic hiding." All this suggests some form of an embryonic moral code—or at least a clear awareness of doing something not tolerated by the dominant force—which leads individuals to cover up their actions (see de Waal 1998).

To be sure, there is no excuse involved in these encounters. Instead, Dunbar (1996: 93) calls this form of behavior "tactical deception: the animals are apparently trying to suppress clues about what is happening, so that other animals remain in ignorance." However, one can speculate that this behavior seems to suggest cognitive processes that are similar to the

excuse. It is the situation of being caught in which human beings are likely to resort to an excuse. The behavior of these primates could even be imagined to involve excuses prior to verbal language. De Waal (1998) also reports that the low-ranking chimpanzee males caught in the act aim to conceal their erection. The behavior of the chimpanzees shows their cognitive awareness of doing something not tolerated, illicit, and of their desire to avoid discovery by others. In this sense, an active excuse after being caught would mirror the deceptive behavior before and during the act.

Both the deceptive behavior as well as the excuse after the fact promise a significant evolutionary advantage. The underdog may get away with something without severe punishment otherwise not tolerated. Hence, his knowledge of it makes it more likely for him to engage in such activity and, as a result, increase his likelihood to produce offspring—which, of course, is *the* evolutionary advantage. Excuses (and deception) are thus not simply passive and defensive; they help individuals engage in specific, otherwise forbidden actions with impunity.

The significance of excuses in the social world can hardly be overestimated. Maybe it is no coincidence that the first human act of communication in the Bible (Genesis 3) is an excuse. In short, I see reason to believe that the human capacity for narratives could have developed in close evolutionary proximity to excuses. (This, of course, does not rule out the possibility that several other urges and evolutionary pressures have found their way into narrative, such as the desire to punish others, as Flesch [2007] suggests, or the playful anticipation of future scenarios, as Eibl [1995], Scalise Sugiyama [2005], and Boyd [2009] speculate.) Still, even if one accepts this version of the evolutionary origin of excuse (and narrative), one can ask whether narratologists today need to care. The pre-historical origin does not need to guide individual narratives. Here we come to complications 2 and 3.

## 6. Is Fiction Based on Excuses?

In this section, it will be asked how these ideas about narrative relate to fiction. My basic assumption is that fiction is narrative and that narrativity is a key feature of fiction. Further, my argument above has two general consequences for fiction: 1) The origin, and to some degree structure, of fiction is *autobiographical* and 2) fiction has the function of *presenting the action of individuals as mere re-actions*.

For reasons of space, I will focus on the second point here. The first point, briefly, may help to explain why fiction is so closely linked to identification and empathy that we cannot even imagine a literature without them. The reason might lie in the excuse. A narrative is offered from the particular point of view of an individual (or sometimes a collective “we”) who aims to persuade listeners to adopt this point of view, to empathize with him or her.

The members of the audience are aware that there may be another version of the events told (otherwise, they do not understand the account offered as a narrative, but as a mere representation of the facts, as I suggested in section 1). The audience may or may not believe the account offered to them, but they need to take the point of view of the one narrating excuse-maker who is aiming to persuade them of its validity. I consider narrative to be autobiographical because of this basic will to persuasion, this drive toward creating empathy. And I believe that this feature remains at work in fiction.

The second point will give us some insights into the history of (Western) fiction. If narratives are in their structure excuses, then narratives and especially institutionalized narratives, such as fiction, reveal how actions tend to be not self-generated but the result of prior forces—and thus excusable. Excuses place actions in a framework of circumstances and contexts that explain those actions, give them a logic and consistency. Even if an action first comes as a surprise to the audience, the work of fiction typically frames it in such a way that it “makes sense” and that usually means it appears to be a reaction to prior events and actions. One could put this into the formula that the work of narrative transforms actions into reactions.

Perhaps this is why the “unheard of event,” as Goethe (1981 [1827]: 744) famously referred to the novella, has such a special status in narrative theory: it is radically exceptional, perhaps impossible, as Derrida (2003) argues. The true event, that is, the action that is not a reaction, is the limit of fiction. By showing an action as a reaction—embedding it in extenuating circumstances—agency is softened, excused.<sup>14 15</sup> To narrate means to situate one action in the context of other events, situations, other actions. This situating or framing gives coherence to the action as a reaction, even if an improbable reaction. It also means that each action is incomplete without the prior events to which it may or may not react. And it means that there is a potentially large number of possible prior events and contexts to which each action could respond. The door to manifold possibilities is opened.

At the risk of sounding paradoxical, I would suggest that action appears in fiction only to disappear and become reaction. Indeed, the history of Western fiction is marked by a general movement from notions of action to reactions.<sup>^</sup> In the classic epics and Greek drama, one can certainly observe how most action is seen in the light of prior actions. The events of the *Iliad*

---

14 Even where the action of an individual is brutal in response to what seems to be friendly prior actions, the agency seems softened by the very fact that one can perceive in it an impairment of the brutal individual, who cannot react to the friendly surroundings. Which is to say that even the brutal act can be explained, *partially*, in terms of this impairment.

15 For a full account of changes in the history of the plot and notions of action and energy, especially in the eighteenth century, see the forthcoming study by Kiss (forthcoming, 2012).

react largely to two framing events, namely, the abduction of Helen and Agamemnon's response to the plague. Likewise, each of the plays of the *Oresteia* builds on an event prior to the staged plot.

In the medieval epics that move in the direction of what we now call novels, the play with action and reaction continues. Parzival in Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival* grows up in a pedagogical experiment that could be inspired by Rousseau, far away from civilization. Hence, one could expect his acts to be free and spontaneous. Instead, he is fascinated by the appearance of the first knight he sees and in all his later development longs to gain true knighthood, thereby reacting to the shining impression of the knight. (Also, of course, medieval folklore has it that birth is destiny: Parsifal cannot help but to pursue knighthood since he is of noble blood.) When he finally acts, by asking the king of the grail what his ailment is, he reacts to his earlier failure, which in turn was a reaction to his teacher's advice.

Once we reach the novel and fiction in the modern sense, sometime after the early modern period (Gumbrecht 1985), action that is not already tied up with reaction seems to disappear altogether or only loom on the horizon. One would be hard pressed to identify action in novels such as Goethe's *Elective Affinities*, Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, Henry James's *The Ambassadors*, and most twentieth-century novels, even if we concede decisions to be a form of action. This should not come as a surprise. If indeed fiction transforms actions into reactions, one could expect a self-reflexive form of fiction that begins with the understanding that all action is reaction. The question in novels becomes increasingly, to what forces does an action react? Since novels tend to offer an abundance of possible framing contexts, it may be that this search for possible prior forces leads the romantics in their fiction to discover or invent trauma as a determining force of human action ahead of medical science: We do what we do because we repeat the past (see Pfau 2005; Breithaupt 2005). So the novel as a genre is closely linked to the shift from action to reaction. It seems as if the narrative of the excuse has come into its own, since there are many possible contexts to consider.

It is helpful in this context to consider a powerful suggestion by de Man to derive fiction from the speech act of the excuse. De Man (1979) argues that the excuse splits off verbal utterances from their empirical referents outside language, and that this split marks fiction: "Fiction has nothing to do with representation but is the absence of any link between utterance and a referent, regardless of whether this link be causal, encoded, or governed by any other conceivable relationship that could lend itself to systematization" (ibid.: 292). To be sure, de Man does not advance an evolutionary argument and instead bases his account on a reading of Rousseau's *Confessions*. Nevertheless, he makes a partly explicit claim about the origin of fiction in the excuse. Excuses regulate the crossing from the world of empirical reality to that of fiction:

It is always possible to face up to any experience (to excuse any guilt), because the experience always exists simultaneously as fictional discourse and as empirical event and it is never possible to decide which one of the two possibilities is the right one. The indecision makes it possible to excuse the bleakest of crimes because, as a fiction, it escapes from constraints of guilt and innocence. On the other hand, it makes it equally possible to accuse fiction-making . . . of being the most cruel. (Ibid.: 293)

Fiction, de Man argues, serves as a shield that deflects overwhelming experiences, guilt, and demands. In the realm of fiction, everything can be experienced, done, and imagined without the consequences that the imagined acts would entail in the empirical world. The excuse operates as the switch between the parallel worlds of empirical reality and of fiction. Once the empirical world becomes too demanding, horrible, or hard to face, the excuse offers a rescue strategy and transposes one into a discourse of fiction.

A further step in de Man's theory consists in closing the system: as long as fiction simply reacts to demands (and accusations) from the empirical world, it remains a dependent sphere. However, de Man imagines that fiction itself also produces the stimulus of the accusation, which makes fiction necessary as a defense/deflection/excuse: "It is no longer certain that language, as excuse, exists because of a prior guilt but just as possible that since language, as a machine, performs anyway, we have to produce guilt (and all its train of psychic consequences) in order to make the excuse meaningful. Excuses generate the very guilt they exonerate, though always in excess or by default" (de Man 1979: 299). De Man's point of departure is the Marion episode in Rousseau's *Confessions*. There, the young Rousseau falsely accuses the maid of stealing a ribbon that he himself had stolen, which leads to her dismissal. This episode deals with what de Man calls "a prior guilt" on the plot level; that is, guilt caused by a morally bad act, which young Rousseau aims to excuse. However, de Man's point goes beyond actual wrong-doing and also involves the reader's intentions and interests in texts. Guilt becomes necessary to motivate the excuse (language split off from empirical referents) and so guilt has to be produced.

In a way similar to our earlier reasoning, de Man therefore suggests that the origin of narratives (and language) may be linked to the escape from accusation. Further radicalizing this thought, de Man draws attention to the reverse movement by which language/fiction has to produce guilt/accusations in order to make itself necessary. Excuses can institutionalize themselves by producing the very accusations to which they (then) react. In short, according to de Man, fiction promises a domain without feelings of guilt. At the same time, fiction produces accusation to show (off) its ability to fend off these very accusations.

In the context of my argument, I cannot follow de Man all the way. His



suggestions that fiction itself has the capacity to produce the accusation (what he calls guilt) to which it then reacts is certainly rich and profound. In the language used in this article, I would restate this argument by saying that narratives themselves only make sense if they also have the capacity to evoke the very accusations or demands to which they react.

However, in contrast to de Man, it seems to me that few excuses are fully satisfying, complete, and thus lead to an autonomous domain beyond responsibility. Rather, the excuse remains involved in the negotiation of responsibility. Eve's involvement does not absolve Adam from responsibility. The excuse does not erase the accusation but offers a counter-version, which leads to further investigation, not to some sphere free from responsibility. Moreover, fiction, I believe, cannot be denied referents. If anything, fiction has an excess of referents (though weak ones, since none of them fully controls the others) that await confirmation. Rather, the business of fiction is the construction, not of an autonomous sphere, beyond the responsibility of either the characters or the readers, but of a different account of agency: It was not my fault; she told me to eat the apple. Narrative fiction creates *chains* of agency: I did it because she told me to do so. Why did she tell me to do it? The snake told her to do it and thus she told me to do it. According to Christian doctrine, we are all implicated because we are sons and daughters of Eve who was told by the snake, to eat the apple, and in turn told Adam to do so. A defining feature of fiction is this infinity of prior events. Only a few mythical origins escape from being effects of prior events: "In the beginning was . . ."

## 7. Social Demands

Following *Genealogy of Morals*, a Nietzschean objection to this speculation about the excuse could go as follows: an excuse is a sign of weakness. Children may resort to it when caught, but grown-ups should be responsible and thus not need it. Even children should learn quickly to take responsibility for their actions.

I think such an objection misses the position we face as social and cultural beings. The enchainment of agency that presents actions as reactions, in the manner of the excuse narrative, responds to particular demands that social beings are exposed to. Social beings face a variety of pressures to conform to the needs of the group. This leads to a certain degree of complexity. For example, an action that is expected by one individual may be disliked by others. Some pressures are concrete, while others are almost undefined, but nevertheless strong. The individual has to promote the welfare of the group as a whole, but it is not usually spelled out what exactly one needs to do. A central place in these social pressures is occupied by what one might call concepts (or "discourses" according to Foucault 2001 [1966]). Concepts of this kind would be God, justice, love, family, freedom,

art, youth, nation, fun, the idea of the responsible grown-up, among others (see Breithaupt 2008: 23-35). Concepts compress the social pressures into demands that are symbolically universalized and affect all members of a group. For example, the concept of the nation demands national service and the concept of friendship demands loyalty. Once a concept emerges, all individual behavior is expected to conform to it. However, it is not part of the concept to specify how one needs to act and behave. There is no protocol to follow, but the expectation is that there should be a proper way to act, anyway, in order to be considered pious, just, or youthful.

This is where narratives, fictions, come in. They show how people, characters, react to concepts, how they attempt to live up to concepts of being good, just, pious, joyful, etc., and thus how they live up to impossible demands (impossible both in their strictness and in their imprecision). When reacting to a concept, that is, translating a concept into a temporal progression, one always faces a vacuum of guidance and thus the impossibility of being right. Hence, any narratives that show individual action can serve as models of how it is possible to endure pressure and lead one's life. In this sense, narratives do not offer the correct way of handling a concept, but rather show how one can get off the hook by revealing the extenuating circumstances, the excuses, that one could only do so much. Every narrative is a version of how to live with concepts, which means how to replace and soften the absolute demand of a concept. In this regard, narratives have an effect similar to rituals.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, Turk (2007) speaks of the self-immunization of fiction which provides strategies to safeguard the self but also exposes it to new risks. This, I believe, is the logic of the excuse at the heart of fiction.

Without the demands on the individual, there would be no fiction, at least not the fiction that is centered around plots as we know it. Possibly, in some age to come, pressures and demands will somehow be taken off the shoulders of the individual. However, let us recall de Man's argument that fiction continues to make itself necessary by producing the very accusations from which it protects. So we can be sure that fiction will continue.

## References

Austin, John L.

1975 [1962] *How to Do Things with Words*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press).

---

16 In particular, one can think of Niklas Luhmann's notion of the ritual as "Kommunikationsvermeidungskommunikation" (communication to avoid communication). According to Luhmann (1997: 235), rituals replace that which cannot (or should not) be communicated (in my sense: "concepts") with a different communication that avoids the first (that is, the concept).

- 1990 *Philosophical Papers*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Booth, Wayne  
1961 *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).
- Boyd, Brian  
2009 *On the Origin of Stories: Evolution, Cognition, and Fiction* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press).
- Breithaupt, Fritz  
2005 "The Invention of Trauma in German Romanticism," *Critical Inquiry* 32: 77-101.  
2008 *Der Ich-Effekt des Geldes: für Geschichte einer Legitimationsfigur* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Verlag).  
2009 *Kulturen der Empathie* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag).
- Brooks, Peter  
2000 *Troubling Confessions: Speaking Guilt in Law and Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).
- Bruner, Jerome  
1986 *Actual Minds, Possible Words* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press).
- Campe, Rudiger  
2008 "An Outline for a Critical History of *Fursprache: Synegoria* and Advocacy," *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* (DVJs) 82(3): 355-81.
- Chatman, Seymour  
1978 *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press).
- Damasio, Antonio R.  
2005 *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain*, 2nd ed. (New York: Penguin Books).
- Dautenhahn, Kerstin  
2001 "The Narrative Intelligence Hypothesis: In Search of the Transactional Format of Narratives in Humans and Other Social Animals," *Lecture Notes in Computer Science* 2117: 248-66.
- de Man, Paul  
1979 *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven: Yale University Press).
- Derrida, Jacques  
2003 "Une certaine possibility impossible de dire l'événement," in *Dire l'événement, est-ce possible?* edited by Gad Soussana and Alexis Nouss, 79-112 (Paris: L'Harmattan).
- de Waal, Frans  
1998 *Chimpanzee Politics: Power and Sex Among Apes*, revised ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press).
- Dunbar, Robin  
1996 *Grooming, Gossip, and the Evolution of Language* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press).  
2004 *The Human Story: A New Story of Mankind's Evolution* (London: Faber & Faber).
- Eibl, Karl  
1995 *Die Entstehung der Poesie* (Frankfurt: Insel Verlag).
- Flesch, William  
2007 *Comeuppance: Costly Signaling, Altruistic Punishment, and Other Biological Components of Fiction* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press).
- Foucault, Michel  
2001 [1966] *Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences* (London: Routledge Classics).
- Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von

- 1981 *Werke* (Hamburg Edition), edited by Erich Trunz, vol. 6 (Munich: Beck).
- Gumbrecht, Hans-Ulrich  
 1985 "The Body versus the Printing Press: Media in the Early Modern Period. Mentalities in the Reign of Castile, and another History of Literary Forms," *Sociocriticism* 1: 179-202.
- Hatfield, Elaine, John T. Cacioppo, and Richard L. Rapson  
 1994 *Emotional Contagion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- Herman, David  
 2002 *Story Logic: Problems and Possibilities of Narrative* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press).
- Keen, Suzanne  
 2008 "Strategic Empathizing: Techniques of Bounded, Ambassadorial, and Broadcast Narrative Empathy," *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* (DVjs) 82(3): 477-493.
- Kiss, Orsolya  
 Forthcoming, 2012 *Force, Action, Plot: The Epistemological Promise of Force in the Long Eighteenth Century*.
- Luhmann, Niklas  
 1989 "Individuum, Individualist, Individualismus," in *Gesellschaftsstruktur und Semantik: Studien zur Wissenssoziologie der modernen Gesellschaft*, vol. 3: 149-258 (Frankfurt: Suhr-kamp Verlag).  
 1997 *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag).
- Nietzsche, Friedrich  
 1967 [1887] *Genealogie der Moral*, in *Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, edited by Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari, vol. VI.2 (Berlin: de Gruyter).
- Panksepp, Jaak  
 2005 "Affective Consciousness: Core Emotional Feelings in Animals and Humans," *Consciousness and Cognition* 14: 30-80.
- Pfau, Thomas  
 2005 *Romantic Moods: Paranoia, Trauma, and Melancholy, 1790-1840* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press).
- Phelan, James  
 1989 *Reading People, Reading Plots: Character, Progression, and the Interpretation of Narrative* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).  
 2007 *Experiencing Fiction: Judgments, Progressions, and the Rhetorical Theory of Narrative* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press).
- Scalise Sugiyama, Michelle  
 2005 "Reverse-Engineering Narrative: Evidence of Special Design," in *The Literary Animal: Evolution and the Nature of Narrative*, edited by Jonathan Gottschall and David Sloan Wilson, 177-96 (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press).
- Searle, John R.  
 1975 "Indirect Speech Acts," in *Syntax and Semantics, 3: Speech Acts*, edited by P. Cole and J. L. Morgan, 59-82 (New York: Academic Press).
- Sternberg, Meir  
 1990 "Telling in Time (I): Chronology and Narrative Theory," *Poetics Today* 11: 901-48.  
 1992 "Telling in Time (II): Chronology, Teleology, Narrativity," *Poetics Today* 13: 463-541.  
 2008 "If-Plots: Narrativity and the Law-Code," in *Theorizing Narrativity*, edited by John Pier and Jose Angel Garda Landa, 29-108 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter).

Taylor, Charles

1989 *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press).

Tommasello, Michael

1999 *The Cultural Origins of Human Cognition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press). Turk, Johannes

2007 "Zur immunologischen Funktion literarischer Kommunikation," *Soziale Systeme* 13: 217-328.

Velleman, J. David

2003 "Narrative Explanation," *The Philosophical Review* 112: 1-25.

Wahrman, Dror

2004 *The Making of the Modern Self* (New Haven: Yale University Press).

White, Hayden

1980 "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality," *Critical Inquiry* 7: 5-28. Wolfram von Eschenbach

2004 *Parzival with Titurel and The Love-lyrics*, translated by Cyril Edwards (Woodbridge: Boydell Press).